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SUPPLY OF HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATES IS EXPECTED TO FALL

Decline projected to start around 2024, driven by drop in number of white high-school students

By Douglas Belkin
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The sharp decline in births during the great recession will result in a fall-off in the number of students graduating from U.S. high schools starting around 2024, a phenomenon likely to translate into additional pressure on U.S. colleges already struggling to fill their classrooms and employers seeking university graduates.

The dip follows 20 years of growth that saw the number of high-school graduates increase by 30% between 1995 and 2013, according to a report released Tuesday by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. The projected decline is driven by a sharp drop in the number of white high school students, which will be somewhat offset by the growth among Hispanics.

The projections present significant challenges for universities because Hispanic students neither attend nor graduate post-secondary schools at rates as high as white students. To adjust to their new customer base, schools will need to re-orient themselves toward a Hispanic, first-generation population to stay competitive, said Joe Garcia, the president of WICHE, a regional nonprofit organization that aims to expand access to higher education.

"To be successful colleges and universities will need to be very focused on serving a different population and frankly a population that we haven't served all that well in the past," Mr. Garcia said.

The implications for the work force and for private high schools are also significant. According to the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 11.5 million of the 11.6 million new jobs created since the 2007-09 recession have gone to workers with at least some post-secondary education. Positions going to workers with a high-school diploma or less have accounted for just 80,000 new jobs.

That decline in white students along with the rise of charter schools is also projected to have a disproportionate impact on private high schools. By around 2030, the number of private school students will drop to 220,000 from 302,000 in 2011, a decline of 26%.

The overall decline in high-school graduates will be felt most intensely in Midwestern states like Michigan and Illinois as well as Northeastern states like Maine and New Hampshire. California, which has been an engine of growth for years, is also facing a steep decline.

The regional winner will continue to be the South. In the early 2000s about one-third of the nation's high-school population came from Southern states. By 2025, those same states will

produce nearly half of all high-school graduates.

The demographic shifts are reshaping the nation's student body. In 2000 white students represented 70% of all high-school graduates; by 2030 they will make up fewer than half, according to the report.

Some schools, like the University of LaVerne, a private school in California, has already made this transition. In 2000, the undergraduate student body was about 24% Latino, it is now 50%, said President Devorah Lieberman.

Getting Latino students through school starts before they even apply, she said. The school hosts a bilingual conference that draws thousands of Hispanic students and their families and walks them through the application process.

"They come with questions that students whose parents went to college don't even think about," said Dr. Lieberman. The conference addresses things like how to fill out a student aid form and what it's like to live in a student dorm.

Once on campus, students can take advantage of a series of support structures in place to get them through college. One of the more significant strategies: the school invites the families of students to campus several times a year.

"You have to identify where they are before you can say 'here's what we're delivering,'" Dr. Lieberman said.